

# THREE DISAPPEARED RIVERS AND THE FATE OF A PORT CITY

**Sajeev Singh.M..K.**  
**Assistant Professor, Department of History,**  
**University College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.**

River valleys served as the preservers of civilization in alternate spheres of the globe. Water forms the quintessential element in agrarian and human activities in Kerala, which formed a part of India, water resources originating from Western Ghats and flowing towards the sea was a favourable condition. This restricted the people in occupying the plane areas. Right now, there are forty four rivers in Kerala. In the ancient period, there existed much more number of rivers. Kerala's geographical nature is a proof of its existence below water. Paleo- channels and lagoons formed part of its resources. The floods were threat to our ancestors. These took away everything to the river or to the sea. Travancore has got plenty of rivers. At present, eight rivers are flowing there.

Vizhinjam, a part of Travancore lacks rivers now. Gangayar, a small canal, which springs from the Western Ghats is the sole remains as part of historical existence. Yet another minute stream joins Vizhinjam near Mulloor. At present, the work of the international sea port is proceeding there. There are ample evidences in the satellite studies and deep geological studies of the presence of three big rivers in the Vizhinjam area in the past. Ground evidences substantiated the study.

A bastion, in the form of the Western Ghats, exists amidst Kerala and South Indian areas. As we move forward to the southern tip of Kerala, in Trivandrum. It can be equated to a water bastion or an enormous water tank, which has the capacity to bear rich quantities of water. The water is being emitted out via various canyons. These gorges appear in the spot where the present dams are found. These spots are specifically Thenmala, Peppara, Neyyar, Pechippara. All these form part of Thiruvananthapuram district, in Kerala and Kodayar and Keeripara, in the Kanyakumari district. Water seeps out of these gorges, branching out to numberless rivers. These rivers ran their courses, formed tributaries and later co- mingled at different points. Neyyar, Pechippara and Kodayar dam locations are located in these openings, specifically at Thenmala, Agastyamala and Peppara. The rivers evolving via these openings established a network of water canals. Vizhinjam was one among the water outlets that moved to the Arabian Sea. Large quantities of water flowed into Vizhinjam Sea through here. Thenmala, a spot in the northern border of Thiruvananthapuram and Keeriparain, in the southern border of Thiruvananthapuram have a length of approximately 125 kilometres. The areas create a reservoir of water, above the Western Ghats, with its numerous outlets. They take the form of many rivers and flow to the Arabian Sea. They make its course in a zig-zag format, as a result, they join together at various places before they reach the Arabian Sea. These rivers are of much advantage to Southern Travancore. The fertility of the spot is certainly due to the river. This, in turn, hiked the production of pepper

and other spices. The next advantage is that they ensure navigational spaces for boats. Those boats could easily pass through these spots. Luckily, Vizhinjam was one among such spots which can be reached smoothly with the help of rivers, across 125 kilometres of Western Ghats.

Vizhinjam owes a higher altitude when compared to the adjoining areas. The rivers ran at a slower pace. As a result, navigation was made easier. Technological advancements was not much then. A much more efficient system of navigation was not possible then. Starting from the South-Western Ghats, spreading around 125 kilometres, the rivers bore huge amount of water to the Vizhinjam shores. At present, two narrow streamlets that make its course along Vizhinjam, from the Western Ghats. Their flow gets interrupted at several spots. The previous millennium was not exhibiting such a state. Three major rivers' survival was highlighted with the help of widespread geological, geographical and satellite studies. The trio sprang from the Western Ghats. Among them, two narrowly let out themselves as streamlets. The third one disappeared totally. Vizhinjam had an influx of water reserve from the Western Ghats. The monsoon season resulted in flood and disaster.

### **River 1 (Vellayani River)**

Vellayani River makes its course across the Northern- Vizhinjam. Its source is Bonacaud (Western Ghats). Bonacaud is approximately 60 kilometres away from Vizhinjam area. Later, it reaches Periyar Wild Life Sanctuary and further to Aryanad and Aruvikkara. On reaching Aruvikkara, it joins the waters flowing from the Neyyar Wild Life Sanctuary. This led to the enlargement of the river and it's fierce movement. From Aruvikkara, it rushes across Vellaikadavu, Kundamanbhagom, Mangattukadavu and Karamana respectively. Later, it reaches Vellayani and Aazhakulam .Then it landed onto the Northern-Vizhinjam area, especially in the Kappalchal area (Vizhinjam) towards the rear end of the old mosque.

Vizhinjam receives much quantity of water and the imprint of it is still visible. The canyon, named Kappalchal in modern phraseology was a creation of this particular river. Ships are anchored soundly in this spots. The spot is got rid of the surge- attack .The lengthy river drifted off the loose soil of the place. The hard rocks are left out ,thereby form a natural protection against the lashing surges. Travancore is an earthquake prone zone. Nine major or minor tremors lent out their rage across this spot. Seismic action is suspected by geological experts at certain time. Certain portions of land had raised and the river mouth was eventually sealed up. The Southern block across Gangayar shifted atop along the vertical plane to the north direction with a minor rotation. The Western block moved towards the lower Southern area. Thereby, Vizhinjam fishing harbour was formed.

The water stopped it's course to Vizhinjam after that happening. The Vellayani Lake evolved from the arrested water. The lake reached towards the Aazhakulam spot. As water retreated, the river area shrunk. An Aazhakulam resident, confirmed that water inflow is maximum in extreme rainy seasons. Aazhakulam is only half kilometres away from Vizhinjam. The origin of the name Aazhakulam is from Malayalam words'

Azham' and ' Kulam'. 'Azam' means deep and 'Kulam' refers pond. Later Aazhamkulam became Aazhakulam. The particular pond is still visible at present. This seismic action resulted in the course of water via Thiruvallam river into the Arabian Sea.

### **River-2 (Gangayar River)**

The Gangayar river evolved from the Western Ghats in the Neyyar dam spot. Springing from here, Neyyar moves exactly 60 miles before landing in the Arabian Sea. A branch of Neyyar moved towards the Arabian Sea across the Vizhinjam block . As the water from Neyyar moves to Vellanad-Kuttichal spot ,it is enjoined by Karamana River and thereby strengthening the water flow. In its renewed vigour it moves through Eruthavoor, Mudavoorpara, Vettukallu pond and Marthandam. From that spot, it moves across the present paddy fields amidst Kidarakuzhi and Neelakesi temple and later reaches Vizhinjam. Previously it was a huge river. As it later diminished in size, it came to be known as 'Gangayar'. It is still persisting. It now appears as a minute stream adjacent to the current Vizhinjam port area. The confirmation of the existence of such a river took place as the Kerala State Electricity Board dug the particular location for the construction of a 11 KV line. It linked Vizhinjam and Kattakada sub-stations respectively. As the digging was in progression, traces of sand and mud were located by the labourers, which in turn provided ample evidence in support of a stature of a river. The photograph has been enlisted below. This enormous water body had in previous time a meritorious part in establishing the economic benefits of Vizhinjam area. It unleashed maximum scale of water there from the Western Ghats. Shipping of spices also took place from the Western Ghats to the spot, Vizhinjam, via through this prime source, namely, the river.

### **River-3 (Mulloor River)**

Yet another river, took its course across the spot, that is, Mulloor area. It was towards the Southern-Vizhinjam direction. Mulloor river had interlinks with the Kodayar dam and Chittar dam area in Tamil Nadu. From that source, the water moved towards Pechippara, Pannimala, Vellarada and Kovilvila areas. Subsequently, the water reaches Aruvippuram and Ayanimoodu locations. The Neyyar river joins it there. In combination, the river, then flows through Kottukalkonam, Maruthoorkonam, Kottukal, Mulloor and later to the Vizhinjam port space at Mulloor. There, the construction of the Vizhinjam International Sea Port is ongoing at present. It has been a source of plenty of water for the place. The foreign folk greatly demanded the sandal wood. Thereby the particular wood was transferred to the Vizhinjam port , from the forests by river- drifting.

The Adani Port Trust of India had dredged the spot during recent times. Discoveries of great quantities of wood, including the sandal wood were made from the water-seething spot. These Paleo-Channels too deserve the credit of possession of huge quantities of river sand. These sand deposits were identified at the time of excavation of the spot. It affirms the being of an inanimate river in this area. In

recent times, we find proofs of a huge river there. It takes its course as a small stream moving and landing into the Arabian Sea, near the present Mulloor.

#### Creation of the Inward Curve of Vizhinjam by the Rivers

The rivers are the highways of Vizhinjam area. They had exhibited a dominant role in moulding the Vizhinjam port. It also had a historical impact. Soil and rock particles comprise Vizhinjam port space. As we traverse towards the Northern-area, Kovalam, the rocky portion begins. It circulates through the core area-Vizhinjam and stops in the Southern-Pulinkudi region. The huge trio rivers, along with their waters drifted the alluvial soil from the coastal zone to the Vizhinjam Sea. As a result, the rocky lands extend in the upper direction and lean out towards the sea. A bastion was created by the protruding and projecting rocky areas. This led to the prevention of the waves hitting to the shores. The river movements led to the pushing of soil portion towards the sea. As a result of the continuation of the particular process for centuries beach-area soil began to erode and an inward curve formed. This inward bent is the present natural harbour. The severity of the waves are very fragile within the curved bent. Thereby, ships could be anchored safely, without giving way to damages of any kind. The rocky upraised area could be utilised as a quay, to load as well as unload the commodities of the port.

Analysts in the geological sector are of the stand that the river no.1 is likely to have initially lost its connection with Vizhinjam port. As a result, an inward bent and in addition to that, a lagoon like spot originated there. It imparted a safe and sound spot for previous era ships to lay their anchor. Starting from the ancient times, this spot was known by the name, Kappalchal. In this particular deep inward water body, which can be very well equated with a lagoon, no serious threats are posed by the surges. This spot existed as a tranquil water body used for the purpose of anchoring ships. The trio rivers had been in existence from time immemorial. They had served as a prominent factor in the formation of the port as well as in the expansion of the economic prosperity too. Initially, the river water had a major role in shaping the fertility of the spot. As a result, large kinds of agricultural crops were developed by this spot. It too favoured and enriched the drifting of agricultural produce from the hinterlands to the Vizhinjam citadel. In the remote past, the area's economic upliftment relied on spices. It included pepper which had splendid importance. The foreigners were demanding spices and they circulated along Vizhinjam. The Western Ghats area too abounds in spices. Later, the spices were taken to the Vizhinjam port space with the help of boats. These rivers were rightly the highways for the transportation of spices to the port spot. In addition, yet another factor too benefitted-Vizhinjam possessed river routes to all easterly places. The Western Ghats is located there. Spices ensured foreign trade. This enhanced the wealth output of Vizhinjam. We can claim the importance of these trio rivers in the historical and economic upgradation of the region. As this spot flourished economically, it gained political importance in its turn. Even the greater powers, including the Ays were naturally lured towards this spot.

## Collapse of Vizhinjam

After the departure of the Ays from the place, the political dominance of Vizhinjam brought to a close. By the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the economic as well as military prominence of Vizhinjam also sunk down. The prime causes among the collapse of Vizhinjam is the vanishing out of rivers. These connected the Western Ghats and the Vizhinjam. In the first place, the Vellayani River lost its connection with Vizhinjam. It was as a result of seismic action and the resultant sealing of the mouth of the river, adjacent to Vizhinjam. The Gangayar and Mulloor rivers had an equivalent fate. The geological experts, who undertook survey, affirmed the fact that these rivers might have disappeared between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries respectively. The geological survey of the location and collected samples from this spot, provide ample proof of the fact. The drying out or shrinkage of these rivers occurred as a result of the shortage of water. Vizhinjam is placed at a higher altitude, when compared to adjoining areas. Vizhinjam has an altitude of twenty nine metres, high above the sea- level and other adjacent areas in the North (Thiruvallam) and South (Chappath). It is through those areas that the water reached the Arabian Sea. They possess an altitude of fifteen and thirteen metres respectively. Thiruvallam and Chappath rivers are alive even now. It is mainly due to the low altitude of these areas from the sea- level. As the diminishing of water bed occurred, the rivers of Vizhinjam initially dried out. It eventually led to the reduction of the transportation between Western Ghats and Vizhinjam. The arrival of spices from the Western Ghats to Vizhinjam also ended, as a result. The inflow of wealth from foreign reserves subsided. The rivers formed the lifeblood of Vizhinjam. They dried out. It blocked the transportation of spices. It was a great economic disaster. The spice trade with foreign countries was the basis of the economic efflorescence of Vizhinjam. The fall in the trading of spices proved to be a blessing in disguise for the other prominent ports in the northern part and the southern part, namely Quilon, Allappay and Colachal. Therefore, the centre of spice trading altered to other ports. This in turn had a negative effect upon the richness and the glory of the Vizhinjam port. Eventually, from historical pathways, Vizhinjam finally vanquished.

## **Bibliography**

1. T .F. Bourdillon, *Report on the Forests of Travancore*, Travancore Government Press, Thiruvananthapuram, 1893.
2. C.V.SundaraRajan ,B.F. Jesse and U. Praveen Khanna “Understanding More about the Water Balance and Origin of Vellayani Kayal: A Coastal Wetland Located in South Kerala”, *Research & Reviews. Journal of Ecology and Environmental Sciences*, Vol.4, Issue 4, March 2017, Hyderabad, p.26.
3. Study with the help of Google earth of Internet.
- 6 Interview with several residents of Aazhakulam.
- 3 Field exploration and field study.